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Documentary Sound: Beyond the Diegetic

Over the last ten years or so, there has been a growing body of literature emerging that examines the role of sound in film. While case studies have been diverse, attention to sound in documentary film has been notable by its relative absence.

The term 'sound design', widely attributed to Walter Murch, has become shorthand for the overall composition of a film's sound track. Although some sources claim use of the term as early as 1972, it was first applied as a film credit to Murch's role in Francis Ford Copolla's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now.* The epithet captured a new state of the art in both the aesthetics and technique of film sound creation and represented a blurring of the distinctions between previously recognised industry roles. It also described the elevation of a key new member to the creative production team who in Copolla's often quoted words, would be "ultimately responsible for all aspects of a film's audio track, from the dialogue and sound effects recording to the re-recording (mix) of the final track." The sound designer then, was entrusted not only with the practical implementation of a director's vision but also with bringing aesthetic insight of their own, on a par with that of a director of photography, picture editor or most pertinently, a musical composer.

Wrapped up in this term then, is both a description of the emergence of a recognized role and a moniker for an aspiration – or set of aspirations – as to what film sound might be. However, rather than being a dispassionate description of the plurality of ways in which sound can be integrated with film images, the notion of a 'sound design' was from its inception associated with the pioneering achievements of a particular individual, the narrative fiction genres in which he worked and the working methods he devised. Murch's influence in the subsequent development of sound in the cinema is enormous and my task

here is not to detract from that in any way. Rather, I am intrigued as to why the technical and aesthetic advances that have evolved in narrative fiction cinema have had so little influence on documentary film making and why critical commentary on documentary film has paid so little regard to sound.

Any discussion on the composition of a film's soundtrack will inevitably invoke the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic sounds. Perhaps the most developed rendering of this idea has been put forward by Michel Chion in his seminal book AudioVision. Here Chion constructs a pie chart, which divides sounds into the three main categories of onscreen (synchronized) sound, such as dialogue, off-screen sounds that nevertheless obviously relate to the activity on screen but happen to fall outside its frame and 'non diegetic' sounds, such as 'underscored' music – or as he calls it 'pit' music, which could not be part of the scene. Chion qualifies this basic scheme with various nuances to account for atmospheres, electronically communicated sounds or others that don't obviously fit into any single wedge on the pie chart. It is interesting to consider how different film genres would populate this chart, with science fiction films perhaps occupying more off-screen 'sound effects' than a romantic comedy, or a luscious costume drama making more use of an orchestral underscore than a more emotionally detached bio-pic. For the most part, however, the qualitative differences in the approaches taken to sound design fall between the distinctions highlighted by the chart. In a film like *Raging Bull,* e.g. there is perhaps more to be said about the provenance of a single punch sound than there is about the ratio of synchonised, non-synchronised and non-diegetic sounds. In documentary film sound however, there is an identifiable trend that can be mapped onto this pie chart. By far the most significant layer of sound in the majority of documentaries is that of speech, whether the speech be dialogue between on-screen characters or non-diegetic narration.

I was intrigued to see, in this September's edition of Sight and Sound, a list of the 50 'Greatest' documentary films of all time, as elected by 237 International critics, curators and academics. There's an additional list made by 103 filmmakers – you've probably all seen them by now. Once the different lists are

concatenated, there are 64 films presented in total. Leaving aside the problems associated with trying to create canons of any art form, the list is nevertheless instructive despite its limitations. Of the films listed, my assertion of the dominance of diagesis, and voice in particular, holds true. Very few of these films have been celebrated for their innovative use of sound – certainly far fewer than can be said for the BFI's 2012 poll for the greatest movies of all time. So are these films any less innovative in their use of sound than their fictional counterparts or is it the case that the notion of 'sound design' has now become an aesthetic value system that privileges certain approaches to sound editing and skews discourse around film sound towards genres in which sound plays a more obvious, if perhaps sometimes more crude and bombastic role?

I believe that the answer lies somewhere between the two. Documentary filmmakers have often overlooked the potential of sound beyond its capacity to act as a conduit for the semantic layer of the voice but where documentary sound does innovate, it doesn't always do so according to the dominant values of a 'sound designer'. In order to explore this idea, I want to start by returning to Chion's pie chart, and to problematise this term that forms one of the cornerstones of film sound analysis: diegesis. If diegesis refers directly to the plot or narrative of a film, a more nuanced reading of the term might include within its definition the composite of all the elements *within* the film that aid in communicating that narrative; be that characters, objects and spaces etc. In this more nuanced reading of the term, the implication is that it is up to the audience to construct a diegesis from these elements – explicit or implied – with the narrative taking shape in the perception of the beholder. However, the word literally translates from the Greek to mean *narration* and Plato and Aristotle contrasted it with the corresponding term *mimesis* – the telling of a story through imitation rather than description. So in a narrative fiction film, where much of the contrivance of the cinema apparatus has been deployed in order for the audience to be immersed in the film —*as if* there— where actors imitate, attempting to inhabit the world conveyed by a script, mimesis is perhaps a better term to describe what is at stake. As John Searle writes, "a fictional story is a pretended representation of a state of affairs; but a play [or in our case a film],

that is, a play as performed, is not a pretended representation of a state of affairs but the pretended state of affairs itself." In many celebrated documentary films though, narrative is to a greater extent told rather than shown, so diegesis might indeed be the appropriate term to describe the way in which this narrative unfolds.

It might be useful then, to think of the presentation of a film's narrative as falling along a spectrum at which diegesis lies at one end and mimesis at the other. For our purposes, the significance of this spectrum lies in the fact that where the narrative is being presented to the audience by means of imitation and immersion, the soundtrack is at liberty to represent much more than simply a subservient synchronized audio accompaniment to the film image because the notion of what can be included in the realm of the *mimetic* is rather broader than what can be included within the realm of the diegetic. If mimesis is about showing rather than telling, every device in the cinematographer's arsenal could be potentially be useful in adding nuance to the story. By contrast though, documentary film often appears to hold to Plato's mistrust of mimesis, valorizing the notion of authenticity and honesty even in the stark light of the contrivances of mediation that any film is subjected to. So perhaps for this reason, documentary film has tended to eschew, or at least sought to disguise, many of the sound practices that have contributed so much to other film genres. In the DVD extras of a wildlife documentary then, we are much more likely to be treated to 'behind the scenes' footage of the location sound recordist travelling to the ends of the earth with specialized equipment and the patience of a monk, than we are scenes of the Foley artist who augmented, replicated or fabricated from imagination these location sounds with close-mic'd studio recordings.

So we can say that sound in documentary film sound tends towards the diegetic rather than the mimetic and that partly as a consequence of this, it tends towards a valorization of the concrete over the abstract. This is hardly a surprise though, given that documentary film images tend towards similar values.

However, I want to suggest that this parallel approach should not be assumed as inevitable. Since sound was introduced to the cinema, it has tended to conform to the expectations of it as a subservient sense, 'adding value' to the image rather than grafting a space of its own. Understood in this way, it seems logical that approaches to sound production should follow the lead of the syntax of images and it is perhaps for this reason that some of the most ambitious contributions of documentary sound have not occurred in film but in radio, where sound has not been shackled to the needs of the image. I'm thinking now of the series of so called 'Radio Ballads' made for the BBC by Ewan McColl, Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger in which 'actuality' voice, location sound and music are put into complex, dynamic relationships in which voice is often not the dominant layer in the exposition of the narrative. In these pieces, place is as likely to be rendered through a song as it is through an 'ambient' location recording, and pitch and rhythm are as essential to the logic of editing text as they are parameters of the music. The whole series is characterized by a rich use of rhythm, texture and timbre and approaches to editing, rather than being linear, scenic and sequential —as would so often be the case in documentary film— are here *essentially* polyphonic, balancing multiple layers of equally significant sonic material in a delicate dance of dominance between them.

In the Radio Ballads, an approach to sound editing is tested, which producer Charles Parker would not have thought to have described as Sound Design, but nevertheless offers a supreme example of sound being utilized idiomatically for the natural characteristics it affords. For sound is not equivalent to image, ears do not behave like eyes, microphones do not behave likes lenses and the characteristics of a soundfield are very different to those of a screen. In an attempt to articulate the unique properties of sound art, philosopher and pre-eminent writer on sound art Christoph Cox succinctly summaries the difference in character between sounds, images and texts when he writes, "sound is immersive and proximal, surrounding and passing through the body. And while texts and images involve the spatial juxtaposition of elements, the sonic arts involve a temporal flux in which elements interpenetrate one another. In Henri Bergson's (1960 [1899]) terms, texts and images present us with 'discreet

multiplicities' while, in the sonic arts, we encounter 'continuous multiplicities'. (Cox, 2011) Time does not allow us now to discuss the articulation of *space* in documentary images and sound now, but I would like to pick up on this idea of sound as a 'temporal flux in which elements interpenetrate one another'. This porosity that Cox alludes to is of course the basis of Chion's film sound pie chart, which recognizes that within a given scene, sounds not only gravitate towards a particular wedge of the chart but they also coexist with other sounds; not in discreet juxtaposition but in interpenetration, as continuous multiplicities. Once this point of departure is established, as I believe it is in the Radio Ballads, the syntax of sound composition can develop according to guiding principles liberated from the default of simply supporting on-screen diegesis.

If Cox's observations are instructive in the critique of all film sound, it is particularly interesting to explore their implications for documentary sound, precisely because documentary has tended towards adopting more conservative, diegetically motivated approaches to sound. If documentary film has, by and large, eschewed the post-production contrivances implied by the notion of 'sound design', it offers comparatively few examples of creatively innovative alternatives of its own. There are examples though.

The eight Radio Ballads were created between 1958 and 1964 and these were preceded by 16 years by Humphrey Jennings 1942 documentary *Listen to Britain,* which depicts the everyday life of Britain at home during wartime. Building on the by now well established idea of montage and applying it to sound, *Listen to Britain* also adopts and develops an editing style that echoes Harry Watt and Basil Wright's 1936 film *Night Mail,* in which the traditional hierarchy between the different layers of the sound track (where voice is preeminent) is challenged. *Listen to Britain* does away with voice altogether, infusing the spirit of W.H Auden's poetic verse in *Night Mail* directly into the logic of the edit itself, preempting the polyphonic, interpenetrative composition of the Radio Ballads.

While I am sure that most of you will be familiar with the film, I'll play a short clip to remind you here:

SHOW *LISTEN TO BRITAIN* FILM CLIP

It is interesting to note that apart from the military vehicles towards the end of the clip and the sound of the teacups, all of the sounds have apparently been added in post-production. Of these, the relationship between the piano and the children clapping is particularly intriguing, with the piano entering to replace the song of the previous scene —which was clearly non-diegetic— creating the expectation that the music here is too. However, the acoustic imprint of the piano implies a greater distance than would be typical for a piano recorded as 'pit music', suggesting the possibility that it might be being played in a room adjacent to the woman making tea. This suggestion is simultaneously confirmed and contradicted as the scene progresses when the woman goes to the window and watches the children in the playground below, dancing to the tune of the piano. There's clearly no way in which the children could be in earshot of the piano if it was being played within the building she is in, so the implication now is that the piano *is* non-diegetic. However, as our attention moves to the children, the fact that they are perfectly in synchronization with the piano necessitates that they must be hearing it, bringing the piano back into the realm of the diegetic. This is also confirmed by the fact that as the camera moves to a close-up of the children, the relative levels of the piano and the handclaps shift, implying a shift in the viewer's point of audition within a single space where all elements of the soundtrack are physically present.

When Edgar Anstey, referring to *Listen to Britain,* accused Jennings of having made 'a work of great beauty that will not encourage anyone to do anything at all' (Leach 1998), he was echoing both John Grierson's belief in the social purpose of documentary film and Plato's suspicion of mimesis. I don't want to be sidetracked here by discussing the political intent of Jennings' work but in the context of this clip, where Jennings cleverly plays with diegesis in this way, one might ask whether this was indeed an aesthetic indulgence, closed within the

syntax of the film, or whether these formal devices actually contribute directly to what was, after all, a propaganda film with a fairly unambiguous ideological agenda?

I want to suggest that the latter is true: that by allowing sound to do what sound naturally does, by recognizing its continuous, porous multiplicities and granting it a degree of autonomy from the picture, Jennings has achieved what only relatively few documentary filmmakers have since. He has allowed the sounds in his film to go beyond diegesis and to perform an epistemological role of their own by entrusting them with the responsibility of contributing to the unfolding of the narrative on their own terms.

Of course, Jennings' innovative use of sound in documentary film is not unique but it does stand out. My other reason for choosing it though, is that given its age, it signaled so much promise, so early on. *Listen to Britain* was made only 15 years after the introduction of syncrhonised sound film (The Jazz Singer) and Jennings was at the cutting edge of what could be done with sound at the time, breaking new ground aesthetically while also utilizing all of the technology available to him and pushing it further than it was intended to go. By the mid 1970s though, when the notion of 'Sound Design' finally gained currency, the majority of documentary filmmakers had set their priorities elsewhere, allowing Sound Design to proceed without them.

In this period, described by some as the 'Golden Age' of documentary film, where so many long-established ground rules of the discipline have been challenged, sound remains relatively under exploited. What might documentary film sound be when it goes beyond the diegetic?

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